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From Practice to Publication: Two Case Studies of ESOL Teachers

All of us, as working teachers, are naturally invested in our craft and practice. We teach and make observations. We learn and adjust our teaching to different groups and situations. As we teach, we share with our colleagues in our workplace or with teachers elsewhere via conferences or online discussions. We rarely, however, pause and think about how what happens in our classroom relates to the field or how we might share our practice through writing for publication to advance knowledge in the field.

As the authors of this article, we aim to share our experiences in converting our own practice to publication, and offer options to other working teachers and graduate students in the field of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) about how they might consider writing for publication as well. We contend that the writing process is not as daunting a task for teachers as it might appear, but rather an extension of what good teachers already do. It is another form of dissemination of our knowledge and practice, but on a wider stage than sharing with our immediate colleagues or peers.

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

Historically in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), the researcher and the working teacher were seen as separate from each other. It was the role of researchers as experts to make sense of the process of learning and for teachers to implement the findings of the researchers in terms of best classroom practice (Allwright 2015; Brown and Lee 2015). Dörnyei (2007) begins his book on research methods with the observation that for a normal person, research can appear to be the province of a white-coated scientist conducting alien tasks in a lab. Even pre-service teachers who engaged with research during their own education programs did not expect research to be part of their day-to-day experience when they began their teaching careers (Puustinen et al. 2018; van Katwijk et al. 2019). Like those students of teaching, we feel that research is far away from our own daily experiences and abilities. We ask ourselves, "Who are we to conduct research?"

This perspective of a divorce between researcher and teacher has subsided over time. Nunan and Bailey (2009) advanced the notion that teachers are in the best position to conduct classroom research and should therefore play a central role in research on pedagogy, whether independently or as a partner with academics. According to Dörnyei (2007, 15), "with a bit of care and lots of common sense all of us can conduct investigations that will yield valuable results."

"What can I write about? What elements of my practice are of interest to the field?"

In fact, teacher research is now supported by theory and is an accepted practice internationally (Borg 2017; TESOL Research Agenda Task Force 2014). While teacher research tends to center on the classroom, it can also focus on the work teachers do outside the classroom (Burns 2019).

If we embrace the idea of teacher as a lifelong learner, research is one way to continue our growth and development (Cao and Newton 2022). Brown and Lee (2015) note that as a developing teacher seeking to better your instruction, "you are researching ideas all of the time, whether you realize it or not" (554–555). McKinley (2019) posits that many breakthroughs in different TESOL fields are owed to the growth of the teacher-as-researcher model in past decades. In fact, both Farr (2015) and McKinley (2019) go so far as to call for more teachers to be involved in the process of research to the extent that they are comfortable.

WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT

As a working teacher or graduate student, you read the section above and say to yourself, "That's all well and good, but what can I write about? What elements of my practice are of interest to the field?"

Potential topics of interest to the field can be defined as follows:

- What are you interested in [when teaching]?
- What questions come up in your teaching?
- What have you done in your classes that you think works really well?
- What "aha" moments have you had in class?
- What do you present on [formally or informally]?

  Cornwell (2008, 8), quoted in Butler (2017, 11); also see Salek and Kim (2022)

When we first encountered these questions, the process became less daunting. The questions that come up in our teaching lead us to interrogate our own approach to discover why a lesson was successful with one group of students and a failure with others.

If as working teachers we choose to pursue our inquiry as teacher-researchers, it can be systematically pre-planned and implemented into our own classroom to assess its effectiveness, a process that is called *action research* (Banegas and Consoli 2020; Burns 2019; Spencer Clark et al. 2020). As we adjust and try new techniques to improve our own classroom, the results can be of interest to other teachers if we share our own findings.

When it comes to identifying our interests and questions to study, they can be as simple as encountering a challenge in our own classroom and, with some effort, finding a solution that works best for our students (Smith and Rebolledo 2018). For example, it can be a teacher who struggled with wrapping up her classes in a way that helped her students to reflect on learning and tried out specific activities (Robles López 2016), or one who developed an effective teaching method of blending simple stick-figure art to help his students review key concepts (Butler 2018). Once we have discovered a solution, we want to share it with other teachers who might face similar challenges in the classroom. The notes and discussions that derive from our teaching practice can be further disseminated by means of conference presentations or other forms of published writing (Hicks et al. 2017). In fact, if you are presenting your classroom practice

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either informally in discussions with your colleagues or as a more formal presentation, you have already begun the process of moving your practice to publication for writing. It is just a matter of taking a carefully pre-planned, systematic approach to investigate the topic formally and in-depth and write about your own findings and their implications.

Techniques and activities that work well are also important subjects for research. As teachers, we all are hungrily curious for ways to teach more effectively. Sharing what works in our classroom can pay dividends not only for us but also for our colleagues, whether they teach in our school or farther afield (Hirst et al. 2019). As Palmer (2009) remarks, we can be too quick to close our doors to our colleagues, unlike doctors and lawyers who observe each other at work. Through this type of sharing, we move forward in the goal of sharing and building each other's capacity.

The "aha" moments are those unexpected flashes of insight and discovery as we teach. They do not need to be planned and often will arise when we do not expect them. Documenting these moments and exploring them further is rewarding. You can become a more reflective teacher by making yourself the subject of the research and inquiry, analyzing your own experiences in-depth and making connections between your life and the greater culture of education, and learning through *autoethnography* (Mirhosseini 2018; Sardabi, Mansouri, and Behzadpoor 2020).

TYPES OF ARTICLES

There are various article types available to a teacher who is interested in beginning to write for publication. These types include newsletter articles, book reviews, teaching-activity shares, conference proceedings, dissertations and theses, interviews with leading figures in the field, and conference reports. For many of these article types, most experienced teachers already possess the skill sets and abilities to do the background work and writing. In fact, some graduate programs in teaching even assign students to compose article manuscripts such as book reviews as classwork (Banegas et al. 2020; Salek and Kim, forthcoming). There are also empirical data-based research journal articles and non-empirical data-based research journal articles.

Most TESOL organizations will feature research journals such as *TESOL Quarterly* and practitioner-oriented journals such as *TESOL Journal*. In the 2017 compilation "How to Get Published in TESOL and Applied Linguistics Serials," TESOL.org listed over 50 such publications. The list does not include newsletters or issues published by Special Interest Groups (SIGs). We would draw your attention to SIGs and newsletters from regional and local TESOL chapters. To give an example, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) alone lists 16 SIGs on its page (2023). These groups specialize in topics from business English to young learners and teenagers. Each of these SIGs offers a newsletter multiple times a year and other publication opportunities, such as their own peer-reviewed journals.

In publications from SIGs and regional TESOL organizations, an editor and/or a small group of reviewers read submitted manuscripts and give feedback. These newsletters and practitioner-oriented journals tend to be welcoming to teacher

and graduate-student writers who are new to research and publication.

In certain cases, editors make it their mission to support and mentor teachers as writers; for example, *The CATESOL Journal* (2023) describes itself as "a rigorous peer-reviewed academic journal. However, we also are a *mentoring journal*; we support the professional development of new scholars." During the review, the editors and reviewers might perform as research or writing mentors to support novice writers with insightful ideas to share. These teacher- and graduate-student-friendly publications are a good way to begin to write for submission before aiming for larger national or international peer-reviewed journals. For example, Michelle (one of the authors of this article), during her graduate work, published in six editor-reviewed SIG newsletters based on her coursework and/or conference presentations, including Kim (2004), Kim (2005a), and Kim (2005b). She then submitted an article that was published in *English for Specific Purposes*, a top-tier, international peer-reviewed journal (Kim 2006).

A further advantage of publications from SIGs and regional TESOL organizations is that they reflect specialized concerns about their topic and location, and they also recognize that teachers are not monolithic in terms of their interests and concerns (Colbert 2021). If you have a topic that you have been working on in your classroom or studies that is very specific, you may be able to find a home for it there in a relatively quick turnaround time. If you have an interest in a topic such as how music education can help English language learners, you might find a fit for it in a statewide journal (e.g., Salek 2021); if you wish to explore how music can motivate your learners, you can submit to a SIG that concentrates on performance in education (e.g., Barbee 2022); or if you wish to relate your own publication journey, a possibility might be a regional TESOL organization newsletter series that deals with writing for publication (e.g., Salek and Kim 2022; Salek and Kim, forthcoming).

PREPARING FOR PUBLICATION

Now that we have established the role that teachers can play as researchers, topics that are of interest to the field, and types of articles that are commonly published in practitioner-oriented journals, it is time to discuss how we can move from our teaching practice to publication. Our premise is that we begin with our teaching. It should be said that this definition of teaching includes not only what occurs in our classrooms but also the work that we do as teachers outside the classroom. It can therefore consist of such elements as lesson planning, working with our colleagues, and developing curricula. This is the first step in our process, as illustrated in Figure 1.

In step one, we teach, and as we teach, we encounter personal interests, questions, techniques that work well, and our "aha" moments. In step two, we reflect upon those elements and begin to generate new ideas. This leads us to reflect in a systematic way what might be occurring in our classroom. For example, suppose that you are struggling with your classroom management as you begin teaching a group of students. Your usual techniques do not seem to work. You might brainstorm at your desk, speak to a more experienced colleague, or search for

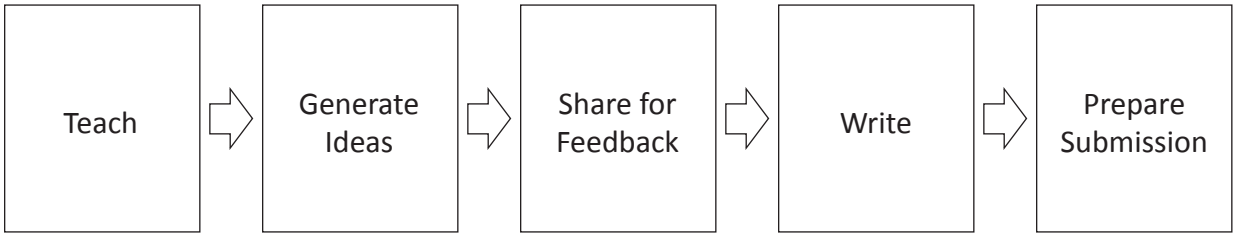

Figure 1. Five steps of the streamlined process

ideas online or in a book. You try out those techniques and have some success or do not. You take notes of what works and does not work with that group of students.

In step three, you take your notes and reflections and share them with someone else. It can be with a mentor, colleagues at your school or farther away, or a friend outside of teaching. The purpose of this step is to share these initial findings for feedback. Receiving feedback on your work provides perspective on your ideas and exposes you to different viewpoints and resources that inform your teaching and your writing. For example, a professor of yours may recommend a relevant article for you to reference and work upon.

As you collect and review your feedback, you may feel ready to move to step four, in which you write. You sit down and compose a draft. You revise it and perhaps share it with your circle of colleagues and mentors to help you improve it further.

After you feel comfortable with your draft, it is time for step five, to prepare the article for submission. You can explore journals, magazines, and newsletters to see what their guidelines are. You should expect that you will need to make certain changes, perhaps to edit your draft to match a word-count maximum or to fit style-guide requirements. If you do not follow the guidelines, your article might be rejected without further review.

The five steps reflect a streamlined process. This is not to say that it is an inferior process, but it is suitable for some article types, such as an activity share or a book review. We have found that this process works well with those types of articles, which are often less involved than other types.

The complex process in Figure 2 is similar in some ways to the streamlined process in Figure 1. The major difference is that with a more complex topic, such as writing on curriculum development, the writing process tends to be more involved.

The complex process adds a further step of "Present." We have found it to be valuable to present our ideas in a larger venue than the "Share for Feedback" stage. Presenting helps us focus and crystalize our ideas as we decide what is most important to communicate to our intended audience. This can be a formal presentation at a conference or an informal one to our colleagues at work. The questions that arise and the comments we collect from other teachers will help us to write more clearly.

The other major difference between the complex and streamlined models is that,

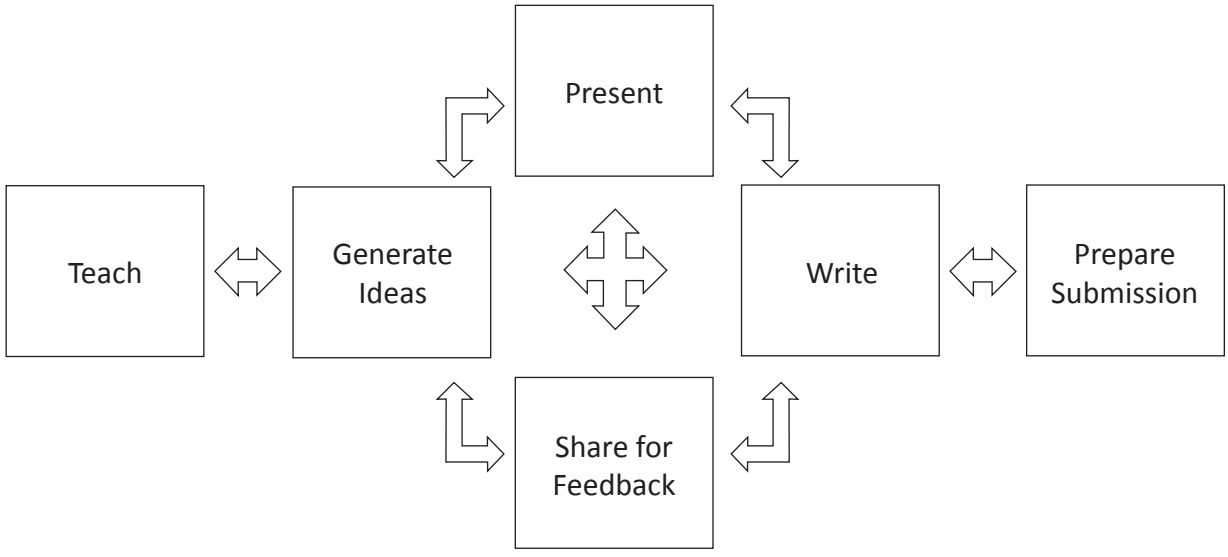

Figure 2. Steps of the complex process

A rejection is very much not the end of the process. As we explain in our case studies, … a rejection from one journal actually helped us to return to our writing and produce better papers.

instead of proceeding in a linear fashion, the steps interact and influence each other. For example, you might read articles that connect to your teaching. You then begin to write a draft. As you write, ideas or questions will usually arise. You may feel that it is necessary to go to the generating-ideas step and do further reading before returning to your draft.

In our experience, the complex model reflects the organic nature of composing an article, where each stage influences others. With the exception of the article types mentioned in the previous section—particularly activity shares and book reviews—we find that the process often does not proceed in a linear fashion, where each step leads naturally and directly to the next one.

Steps of the Submission Process

When you feel comfortable with your completed draft, it is time to begin the submission process. As described in Butler (2017), these are the common steps when submitting:

1. You send the submission to the journal and receive a confirmation email with a submission number and estimated time for initial screening.

2. Should your article pass the initial screening, you will be contacted by an editor to let you know the progress of your submission.

3. Your submission will pass to a peer double-blind review, and reviewers will read it carefully. They will recommend whether or not the article should be published and give critical feedback for improvement.

4. The editor will contact you with the reviewers' feedback and let you know if the journal wishes to proceed with your article. Should they wish to do so, you will typically be asked to make revisions based on the reviewers' and editor's feedback.

5. You make revisions based on the feedback and submit your revised manuscript to the editor.

6. The editor will contact you to let you know whether the submission has been accepted for publication.

This process might vary depending on the publication and article type. We would also emphasize that a rejection is very much not the end of the process. As we explain in our case studies, presented in the following section, a rejection from one journal actually helped us to return to our writing and produce better papers.

THE PROCESSES IN ACTION: TWO CASE STUDIES

We will now present two case studies from our own experiences to illustrate the processes in action.

Two of the authors, Geoff and Lara, possess master's degrees in teaching and have no specific background in research nor obligations to present or publish beyond a requirement to demonstrate ongoing professional development, such as participating in weekly staff meetings and in mandatory training. Their experience prior to presenting and publishing was limited to what they had learned during their master's

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coursework, advice from former professors, and reading completed on their own.

Geoff and Lara are working teachers in K–12 education in North Carolina. In our prior work experience, we also taught in an Intensive English Program attached to a local North Carolina university and at a university in Seoul, South Korea. We have taught a full workload of 20 instructional contact hours in both positions. This is in addition to grading, assessment, and weekly student conferences. While our workplaces encourage and support such efforts at professional development, we have had no funds or time devoted to research. As our prior director stated, we were welcome to conduct research so long as it was on our own time.

Our first case study illustrates the streamlined process, as we share how Geoff began his publication journey with a book review.

Case Study 1: Geoff's Book Review

Prior to completing his Master of Arts degree in TESOL, Geoff was teaching at a small after-school program in Japan, working with young learners. He realized that he was having difficulty engaging his learners for long periods of time and decided to seek out activities that would keep them engaged while meeting the lesson outcomes. He was a member of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) at that time, and reading through an issue of *The Language Teacher*, he noticed that the second edition of Ur's (2009) *Grammar Practice Activities: A Practical Guide for Teachers* was available for review (Rouault 2010). He emailed the editor, and upon learning that the review copy was available, Geoff requested it with the understanding that he would use it to complete a review.

From there, Geoff read the book, taking careful notes. He also used many of the activities in his teaching. As he went along, he also journaled his teaching observations and reflected upon those observations. With a colleague, he discussed how he used the activities at the after-school program, sharing his learning for feedback. He used those discussions and the feedback from his colleague to outline and draft his thoughts. He also took time to read other book reviews to make certain that he understood the editor's expectations in terms of format, style, and tone. When he was finished, he shared his draft with three other people to get feedback prior to submission to *JALT Journal*. He then submitted his manuscript and began the steps of the submission process, including making revisions suggested by his editor. Six months after his initial email of inquiry, his review was accepted for publication, and the review was published in an issue the following summer (Butler 2011).

Returning to the streamlined process visualized in Figure 1, we see how Geoff followed the five steps.

1. He realized that he needed to improve his teaching practice, and that led him to generate ideas about how to do so. One way that he did that was to consult an outside source, *The Language Teacher*. As it happened, the journal had a copy of the grammar-activity book available for review.

2. He requested the book and used it to generate ideas on how to improve his teaching practice. It should be noted that Geoff did not merely passively use teaching ideas from *Grammar Practice Activities*; he also took notes and

journaled in a reflective manner on his lesson plans and their outcomes.

3. He shared his thoughts and use of the activities with a colleague to get feedback and reflect on what he had done and what ideas he was missing.

4. He then began to compose his thoughts into a written composition.

5. As a final step, he prepared the writing into a more fixed form for submission.

This linear process is the way that we tend to think about reflecting, generating ideas, and composing an article type such as a book review or an activity share.

Case Study 2: Geoff and Lara's Article on a Curriculum-Development Project

Geoff and Lara were working at a university in South Korea and were tasked with developing a new curriculum. We developed, evaluated, and revised our curriculum with colleagues over the course of a year (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014).

It should be mentioned that this was an expanded definition of our teaching practice, in that it was an element of our work that occurred both inside and outside our individual teaching practice. This represented the first step of teaching. As we worked on teaching and revision, we decided that it would be best to take a step back and discuss what we had done. As a group of three (the authors of the article), we met over coffee during those months and discussed our experiences, placing us in the category of generating ideas. We felt that we had a topic of interest and began the process of writing a rough narrative of what we had done. As the narrative was complete, we did additional research in the field of TESOL and compared our experiences with those of other teachers. While this might seem to be a step backwards to generating ideas, it demonstrates that the process was not linear.

When we completed our initial draft, we shared it with three readers outside our university to confirm that our ideas would be clear and of potential interest to the field. One reader was a professor of ours, the second was another teacher, and the third was outside the field of TESOL. We received feedback and made revisions. We also submitted a proposal for that year's Korea TESOL (KOTESOL) International Conference.

We then finalized our article for submission and sent it to a journal that we had selected. It was rejected within a few hours. The editor mentioned that while the submission topic was of interest, they wanted to see several changes to our article, including the addition of quantitative data such as test scores in support of the effectiveness of our curriculum development. It should be said that there was no such requirement in the submission guidelines. Although our submission was rejected, we decided to seek more feedback from one of our readers, a professor who had experience in publication. He read the editor's feedback and observed that the feedback was asking us to compose a completely different paper. He further said that our article was strong enough and that we should consider submitting it to another journal.

At this point, we put a pause on the paper. Because we had earlier submitted the topic for a conference presentation at KOTESOL, instead of revising our paper again, we spent time preparing for the presentation. This was helpful, as it forced us to focus on what was most important to our audience and to hone a clearer message. The presentation was well received, and KOTESOL solicited presenters to submit to their conference proceedings.

This process, summarized in Figure 2, helped us to return to our writing and to divide our paper into two parts. One detailed the changes that we made to our curriculum at our university, and the second described the process that we used to generate and

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revise our curriculum. The former paper (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014) was submitted and accepted to KOTESOL Proceedings, and the latter (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2015) was submitted to *English Teaching Forum* and accepted following a process of editorial review, feedback, and resubmission.

The process for this case study is not linear but complex, as illustrated in Figure 2. We moved back and forth from one step to another and even had to return from initial submission back to the writing, sharing, and presentation phases. It still was a process in which we started with our teaching practice and finished with preparing for publication, but we went back and forth several times as we worked on the various iterations of these two distinct papers.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

You will no doubt notice the importance of sharing for feedback in our process descriptions and case studies. A further step that we suggest is to form a group that meets regularly and discusses the article manuscripts that the group members are working on. The writers in the group do not have to be working on the same topics but must be willing to discuss and give feedback. This not only creates a ready pool of colleagues from which to get feedback but also helps us feel accountable for writing and moving forward on a project. After a long day of teaching, we admit that writing and researching are not the first activities that we personally wish to do. Having a group helps us to push forward through those blocks.

We would be remiss if we did not mention that the publication process can take time and energy. For example, in our first case study, it took about one year from Geoff requesting the book on grammar activities to the publication of his review. Even though this is an example of our streamlined process, it still took time and energy to complete. In our second case study, we began meeting to discuss our reflections of the curriculum development in the winter of 2012, and it was a long and winding process between those initial discussions and the eventual publication in the fall of 2015. While writing both articles was immensely rewarding, new authors should be aware that they will be investing their free time and energy towards these projects.

We would also remind that all writers are ultimately readers. It is important to be familiar with the journals to which you hope to submit. Reading through a few articles from the journal can give you a sense of the style and approach that your editors will expect and guide you towards. As we mentioned earlier, reading the submission guidelines carefully can help you avoid quick rejections for not meeting submission criteria.

We would also reiterate that a rejection is not the end of this journey. Even if you decide to take your submission to another publication, you will receive feedback that can help you revise your draft and improve your ideas.

Since the publication of the articles featured in our two case studies, we have continued to engage in inquiry about the nature of our classrooms and teaching practice. This method of inquiry and research has informed us and helped us reflect upon our students, their learning, and our own learning. We have found these reflections and writing for publication to be rewarding. We hope that the visualization of our own processes will guide other teachers

to learn to do the same as they embark on their own journeys.

We believe strongly that what occurs in our classroom is worthy of sharing with others. Indeed, our successes and failures can inspire us to discuss with others. These conversations can occur at conferences or in publications in addition to our own schools or universities. This sharing not only leads us to make sense of our practice but also helps other teachers with their own. The publication examples from our teaching demonstrate clearly that writing for publication is not limited to academic researchers.

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